

'The FTA with Colombia is viable'
By Sam Farr, Member of Congress
***El Tiempo*, Bogata, Colombia**
January 12, 2008

(Translated from Spanish.)

It is important to consider this trade agreement in the larger context; more than a simple business deal. It demands patience and dedication.

I first arrived in Colombia in 1964, at the age of 22, as a Peace Corps volunteer assigned to Barrio Castilla in Medellin. I worked in "Accion Comunal" as one of the 700 volunteers known as "Hijos de Kennedy" who were working in the country. Since those years, I have journeyed back several times to visit my many close Colombian friends.

My situation is much different in comparison to 40 years ago. Then, I was living in poverty among my Colombian neighbors. Now, I am a member of the U.S. House of Representative representing California's Monterey Bay. While many things have changed, what remains the same is that I care deeply about Colombia -- a country that so enchanted me then and continues to today.

One issue that is of great importance to me and to many Colombians is the pending free trade agreement between our two countries. Let me first say I believe a trade agreement with Colombia is viable. I also believe that it will take much patience and dedication to be realized. It is only through hard work and flexibility on both sides that a trade accord is possible.

Congress appreciates the struggle to combat the political violence that has erupted out of deadly mix of the drug trade and poverty. We have just given Colombia over \$500 million (U.S.) to support "Plan Colombia," but we are not yet in agreement over the conditions of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

Before everything else, it's important to consider this agreement in the larger context; this is not merely a business deal. If it were pure business, the costs and benefits of the transaction would be the only consideration. But in the case of free trade agreements, there are many other factors involved in the decision.

Members of Congress are influenced by many things, perhaps the most important of which is the history of violence against trade unionists and the impression that the Colombian government has not prosecuted those crimes. This influence is expressed by labor leaders in our home districts.

Democrats -- who now control Congress -- recognize that Colombia has made some progress. New information tells us that the annual number of trade unionists killed has fallen from 197 in 2001 to 72 in 2006; that Colombia has demobilized thousands of former militants; and that Colombia is levying taxes on the elite to support social and economic programs vital to future prosperity.

Nevertheless, we are also told that Colombia remains the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist. More than 30 union members have been murdered this year and many more threatened. There is a culture of near-total impunity for crimes against union members.

According to information I've been provided, 98 percent of crimes against trade unionists remain unsolved and death threats are a fact of life for people organizing and working in unions.

Furthermore, there are a number of influential organizations that are skeptical of free trade agreements and their historically weak social and ecological protections. These groups, from anti-poverty advocates and faith-based organizations to worker unions and environmental groups, have raised some objections to the trade agreement.

Even Congressional Representatives from the Republican Party, who form the conservative side of the U.S. political spectrum and who have been historically receptive to free trade, are wary of new trade agreements. A recent poll showed that nearly 60 percent of Republican voters believe foreign trade has damaged the U.S. economy.

Given this political backdrop and next year's presidential election, all new trade deals are receiving especially rigorous review in the halls of the Capitol. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Colombia free trade agreement has been placed under a microscope by U.S. politicians.

In the face of these doubts, I know that steps are being taken by the Uribe government to end the culture of impunity that surrounds these types of criminal acts. But the subunit on labor crimes in the Human Rights Unit of the Attorney General's office needs more staff, resources and political support. And the International Labor Organization office in Bogota must have adequate staffing and a mandate to regularly evaluate whether the fundamental right of workers to organize is being protected.

The second issue is the rights of internally displaced Colombians. Human rights advocates have argued that people continue to be pushed from their land, that the government is systematically undercounting displaced persons to avoid providing social services and that greater investment in export-oriented agriculture will harm small, rural producers. They claim that a trade agreement will put greater pressure on the rural poor and increase violence against those who try to maintain control of their land.

These two arguments are not easily defeated, and they must be addressed by the Colombian government to ensure that negatively impacted workers will be taken care of before the U.S. Congress will consider an agreement. My colleagues in the U.S. Congress constantly seek evidence that recent gains in Colombia are genuine, sustainable and will be deeply embedded in Colombia society through strong democratic institutions.

To be clear, the Democratic Congress wants to see absolute proof that Colombia has taken concrete steps to address past problems on labor union violence and human rights abuses.

Finally, I want to reiterate my love for Colombia, but any treaty must benefit both of our countries. Concerns related to labor practices and human rights must be addressed, and the United States must guarantee that our own workers won't be harmed by loss of jobs to Colombia. This agreement is not only about Colombia's future, it is also about local elections in America.

Our voters want to see their elected officials doing things to eliminate violence and injustice, not only in our country but also in Colombia. We admired the "No Mass Protests," and now we want to see them put into practice. The trade agreement is our only chance to ensure a better outcome.